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Of tidy gardens and clean houses: housing officers as agents of social control

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Abstract

This paper seeks to contribute to the theme of institutional geographies by exploring how the prevailing socio-spatial order is recreated and legitimated in the ways in which public rented housing is managed and delivered by housing associations and local authorities in the UK. The public rented sector has been increasingly catering for the most vulnerable sections of the population who are dependent on state benefits and cannot afford any other form of housing. As a result, housing staffs have found themselves having to take on a welfare role which entails controlling and policing social tenants who are seen to be causing disorder in society. This paper shows how a dominant housing management discourse reproduced by policies and staff at both front-line and management levels is that of an emerging 'underclass' promoted by right wing politicians and the media since the 1980s. According to dominant housing management discourse the members of this underclass are disrupting traditional patriarchal and capitalist institutions and values. Tenants' houses and gardens not conforming to culturally and socially acceptable standards of cleanliness and tidiness symbolises tenants' lack of conformity to the prevailing institutional order. Drawing on in-depth interviews with housing officers and managers, and observations of interviews between staff and tenants in six housing organisations, this paper analyses the ways in which housing organisations seek to control social tenants through the imposition of certain norms of cleanliness over their houses and gardens.

Keywords: Housing management; Discourse; Control; Norms of cleanliness; Houses; Gardens; Underclass

1. Introduction

This paper aims at exploring the ways in which staff working in the management and delivery of public housing reproduce institutional power structures by imposing dominant social and cultural norms of cleanliness and tidiness onto the physical spaces that social tenants occupy. More particularly, it explores the ways in which housing staffs control the tenants they see as a threat to the prevailing social order through the imposition of these norms.

This paper is centred around three main points. First, it is argued that dominant housing management discourse views some of their tenants as irresponsible children who need to be controlled because traditional patriarchal and capitalist institutions and values have broken down. Second, it is argued that the degree of conformity of tenants to the prevailing social order is assessed by housing staff according to dominant ideas of respectability. Central to these dominant ideas of respectability is the perceived cleanliness and tidiness of tenants' houses and gardens. Third, it is shown how the imposition of dominant values of cleanliness are inscribed in organisational structures and in the ways in which staff at different levels within housing organisations deal with tenants on a daily basis.

2. Housing management in the UK: a brief overview

Public rented housing in the UK, which is housing provided by local authorities and housing associations, has been affected by a number of social, economic, political and ideological changes. The size of this sector has declined during the 1980s and 1990s as the government reduced subsidies, allowing only housing associations to build new subsidised housing, and passed the 'Right to Buy' legislation by which tenants could buy their council houses. As a result, the remaining council stock is in poor condition (Forrest and Murie, 1988; Malpass and Murie, 1994). In addition to governmental policies contributing to the shortage and unattractiveness of public housing, the Conservatives have actively

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promoted home ownership as the normal and natural form of housing tenure in the UK. This implies that home ownership represents success or at least social aspiration while other tenure like private or public renting represents failure or personal weakness. The public housing sector has become increasingly polarised as it is catering for the poorest sections of the population: those dependent on welfare benefits who cannot afford any other form of housing (Clapham, 1987; Forrest and Murie, 1988; Curtis, 1989; Cole and Furbey, 1994; Malpass and Murie, 1994).

These changes have had important implications for housing managers and officers who are in charge of providing and managing public housing stock. The management of social housing by both local authorities and housing associations is increasingly at the forefront of the mediation between disadvantaged individuals, communities and the state. As a result, housing managers and officers have found themselves having to increasingly take on a welfare role rather than simply acting as landlords. At the same time housing management has been influenced by both government and its regulatory bodies to adopt more of a business-oriented approach and to contain costs. This process has been intensified with the introduction of the compulsory competitive tendering of housing management (Clapham and Franklin, 1994).

Housing management as an occupation has always lacked a clear definition of its role, and unlike other welfare services, has not acquired a well-defined sense of professional identity (Laffin, 1986; Stewart, 1988; Franklin and Clapham, 1997). The current contradictory pressures placed on housing staff to take on a policing role as well as a caring role while working within tight resources within an increasingly consumerist culture has increased tensions and conflicting views about what housing management should be about.

Even though there has been a certain amount of research on housing management to date, these studies have either focused on the changes that it has undergone (Clapham, 1987; Kemp and Williams, 1991, Cole and Furbey, 1994) or have been concerned with assessing its effectiveness (Centre for Housing Research, 1989; Bines et al., 1993). However, much of housing research has not explored the ideological underpinnings of housing management. In fact as it has been argued, (Kemeny, 1992; King, 1996; Clapham, 1997) research in housing studies has remained largely isolated from theoretical debates in the social sciences. It is only recently that conceptual framework has been developed in housing research (Kemeny, 1992; Jacobs and Manzi, 1996; Franklin and Clapham, 1997; Clapham, 1997; Saugeres and Clapham, 1999; Saugeres, 2000). The research project this paper draws on aimed at taking a different approach to housing management by exploring the ways in which it was socially constructed in relation to the current socio-economic and political climate. It is in the context of changes in the public housing sector and its management and delivery that the relationship between housing staff, ideology and the reproduction of a dominant socio-spatial order has to be understood.

3. Towards a geography of institutions: structures, ideology, and discourse

The study of institutions and institutionalisation has been the object of considerable work in Sociology and Economics but has not been a central theoretical concern in most areas of geography. Geographical work on institutions has been mostly carried out in economic and political geography, for instance focusing on the relationship between local institutions, globalization and economic development (Amin and Thrift, 1994). The articles in the book edited by Flowerdew (1982) *Institutions and Geographical Patterns* focus on the effect of institutional structures and actions on the economy and the environment in different contexts. However, these studies do not examine the ways in which institutions shape the lives of individuals and the ways in which individuals play in shaping institutions. Neither do they take into account the role that culture plays in shaping institutional structures. It is argued here that, if we are to develop an institutional approach in social and cultural geography, it should be one which explores the role that both culture and economic relations play in creating and maintaining the institutional order, and explores the ways in which people both reproduce and negotiate dominant ideologies through everyday discourse and practice.

3.1. Institutions, ideology and discourse

Institutional theorist Scott (1995) defines institutions as consisting of

> cognitive, normative and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behaviour. Institutions are transported by various carriers-cultures, structures, and routines and they operate at multiple levels of jurisdiction (p. 33).

In this view, institutions incorporate both symbolic systems and regulative processes carried out through social behaviour while also shaping social behaviour. Scott (1995) points out that even though institutions are constructed and maintained by individuals, they appear to be impersonal objective reality. To draw on Berger and Luckmann (1967) every institution has a body of knowledge, which defines appropriate codes of behaviour. As this body of knowledge is learned and shared by

a group of people, it is internalised as being the only reality, so that any radical departure from the institutional order is seen as a departure from the natural order. In other words, institutions produce structures which impose a set of rules and definitions of appropriate codes of behaviour constraining people's actions and interactions. However, individuals are not passive recipients of these structural constraints, they are themselves active agents in the reproduction and negotiation of institutional reality and structures.

According to Bourdieu (1990) it is through the *habitus*, a system of dispositions that people have been socialised into, that they themselves reproduce dominant ideologies. However, as people enact this system of dispositions they are able to make choices and adopt an infinite number of strategies in an infinite number of situations, which could not be predicted by any rules. Thus, people do not only reinforce and reproduce practice, which is structured by the *habitus*, but also alter practice through negotiation, resistance, rebellion, so that structure is also constituted by practice. Discourse is crucial to this process because it is through discourse that people both reproduce and contest dominant ideologies, which are inherent to the prevailing institutional order. The definition of discourse used here to quote Fairclough (1992) is that it "refers to different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practice" (p. 3). Within a particular body of knowledge or organisation there will be dominant discourses but there can also be alternative ones. Discourses in that sense are manifested in particular ways of using language and other symbolic forms such as visual images. As Fairclough (1992) argues, "Discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct or 'constitute' them; different discourses constitute key entities ... in different ways, and position people in different ways as social subjects ..." (p. 4).

Mumby (1988) argues that institutional discourses and practices are ideological. Ideology is not simply a set of ideas imposed upon people or a belief system through which people orient themselves. Ideology is intrinsically linked with consciousness so that structures of domination exist through domination of human consciousness. Mumby (1988) argues that the relationship between ideology, consciousness and communication exist, "in the context of actual material practices and actual social structures" (p. 71). Mumby views ideology as legitimating and reproducing structures, which favour the powerful so that ideology is itself materially grounded in everyday practice. Thus, ideology and power are inseparable as ideology articulates social reality in terms of dominant social groups.

This paper aims at exploring the relationship between institutional structures and dominant ideologies as reproduced by housing officers and managers through everyday discourse and practice.

3.2. Housing, welfare institutions and socio-spatial control

As Flowerdew (1982) points out, housing should be of particular interest to the development of an institutional geography as the allocation and distribution of scarce urban resources like housing has an important influence on the social and spatial structure of society. For instance, Haddon (1970) and Pahl (1970) argue that there are fundamental spatial and social constraints on access to scarce urban resources, which reflect and recreate unequal power relations in society. This is because housing officers as gatekeepers of scarce resources tend to allocate housing in ways that exclude people in already disadvantaged positions.

Sahlin (1995), drawing on Foucault's concept of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1979), identifies two kinds of strategies used by staff in housing organisations in order to exclude people. The first strategy is what Sahlin calls *border control* which involves physically excluding applicants from obtaining or keeping public rented housing, or spatially marginalising them by only giving them access to poor quality housing in disadvantaged areas. The second strategy is what Sahlin terms *discipline*. This strategy aims at controlling social tenants' behaviour by supervising, training, punishing and rewarding them.

Border control would be carried out through the screening of applicants to housing provision. As public rented housing is a scarce resource it can only be allocated to a limited proportion of the population: people deemed to need it the most. However, what constitutes need is socially constructed by bureaucracies and is not only different from organisation to organisation, but also from situation to situation. In addition, as Henderson and Karn (1987) have argued, the unequal distribution of resources reflects the wider class, race and gender structure of society. As their research shows, housing staff categorised tenants as being "respectable" or "non-respectable" and could manipulate some of the rules in favour of the "respectable" tenants at the expense of others and, in doing so, reproduce wider social inequalities (Henderson and Karn, 1987).

Cole and Furbey (1994) also points out that indeed when housing resources are scarce, housing managers resort to dominant social distinctions. These dominant ideologies influence practice through the grading of housekeeping standards and the stereotyping of households and their expectations of location and type of housing.

In the UK, top-management in both local authorities and housing associations have tried to limit the amount of discretion of front-line staff regarding the allocation of housing in order to reduce these kind of discriminatory practices. For instance, most organisations allocate housing according to a point system, which prioritises certain pre-defined categories of need. Front-line staff visit applicants and assess their situation according to

the point system, establishing whether they have a housing need. When a property becomes vacant and the housing officer has interviewed a few people with the amount of points allowing them to be considered for that type of property in that particular area, the housing officer will then make recommendations but it is their line-managers who will make the final decision.

However, dominant ideologies are reproduced through discourse and practice at all levels of the organisation and policy making itself. As Sahlin (1995) points out, strategies of exclusion in social housing consist of both formal and informal, both covert and overt practices. As Hanff (1993) also argues, even the coping strategies used by staff in everyday practice and the ways in which they interpret and respond to a particular situation are shaped by the organisational and occupational culture they belong to as well as wider social and cultural values. This also applies to *discipline*, which is the mode of control and exclusion that this paper seeks to explore. The categorisation of tenants (according to norms of cleanliness) and the imposition of dominant values (of cleanliness onto the spaces that tenants occupy) as a means of social control take place at both the formal and informal, conscious and unconscious, covert and overt levels. It will be argued that these dominant values of cleanliness are part of capitalist and patriarchal ideologies of work, the family and home ownership, which are reproduced by bureaucratic structures and individuals through everyday discourse and practice.

4. Methodology

This paper draws on a two-year ESRC funded research project which investigated the ways in which housing management was socially constructed in six housing organisations (three local authorities and three housing associations) in three contrasting geographical and economic locations: a relatively deprived inner city area in the North West of England, an urban area with less incidence of deprivation in south Wales, and a smaller and more prosperous mixed urban/rural area in the South East of England.

The core of the research consisted of in-depth interviews with staff in different positions. The interviews were based on a list of themes which focused on staff's work histories and were open-ended in order to create a situation in which the interviewees had room to express themselves on their own terms. The interview was viewed as a form of discourse, which was the joint-product of the interaction between the researcher and the researched. In addition, ethnographic observations of staff interviews with tenants, both in tenants' homes and in housing offices, were carried out in order to gain insight into the ways in which staff conducted their jobs and constructed their roles in their everyday interactions. Focus groups with tenants were conducted in order to gain some insight into the ways in which tenants perceived housing management and its delivery. Policy documents were also analysed in order to both gain contextual information and assess the extent to which there was a dominant housing management discourse. This paper draws on in-depth interviews with staff and ethnographic observations across the six organisations, and the analysis of policy documents.

The interview transcripts and policy documents were not analysed with the aim to obtain factual information about housing management but to uncover the competing meanings that housing staff give to the bureaucratic reality within which they operate. The texts were thus themselves analysed as social constructions. Consequently, the analysis carried out focused on how discourse was constructed in specific interactions and was very much grounded in practice.

It will, firstly be shown that housing managers and officers reproduce capitalist and patriarchal ideologies by attributing the root of social problems to the breakdown of traditional capitalist and patriarchal institutions and values. As social tenants are seen to be living outside the institutional order, housing staff become agents of social control behaving much like parents towards children: supervising, educating, looking after, punishing and rewarding tenants. Secondly, it will be argued that, however, housing staff distinguish between the good tenants who are seen to be respectable citizens willing to conform to the dominant social order, and the bad tenants who are seen to be social misfits, without any rules and any respect for the prevailing social order and its values. The ways in which tenants keep their gardens and houses become an important symbol of conformity to the social order by which housing staff assess whether tenants are respectable or non-respectable citizens and try to control their behaviour. Thirdly, the paper will focus on the strategies that housing officers and managers use to control and exclude tenants who are not keeping their houses and gardens to certain standards of cleanliness.

5. Housing management and the 'underclass': reproducing patriarchal and capitalist ideologies

All the staff interviewed stress that social problems – referring mostly to neighbour nuisance, drug taking, vandalism and crime – have increased as a result of changes in society with particular consequences for social housing. The view is that public rented housing is now catering for people who create the most social problems, people who live on the margins of society.

Housing managers and officers also stress that the majority of people who live in public rented housing do not cause problems but that much of their job involves dealing with the minority of problem-tenants.

These two categories of social tenants correspond to, on the one hand, the respectable working or middle-class, or at least aspiring to middle-class values and lifestyle, as opposed to, on the other hand, the underclass (see Murray, 1990; Walker, 1996). As Walker (1996) points out, there has been an attempt in Britain to separate two groups of poor people all throughout the century. On the one hand, there would be the deserving poor, a group of people who are poor due to factors largely beyond their control. On the other hand, there would be the undeserving poor, a group of people whose behaviour contributes largely to their poverty. However, since the 1980s, a discourse about "an emerging underclass" which has been promoted by right wing thinking has dominated politics and the media. Those who are seen to belong to the underclass are not necessarily the poorest but those who are seen as not conforming to the prevailing social order. This includes the long-term unemployed, single-mothers and their children, people taking drugs and engaged in criminal activities (Murray, 1990). This discourse blames the victim for their own deprivation and stresses the breakdown of family values and morality (Roseneil and Mann, 1996; Walker, 1996). As it will now be shown that even though the term underclass was not specifically used by the housing directors, managers and officers in this study this discourse was very prominent among them.

5.1. The collapse of traditional institutions and values

Most of the staff interviewed talk about unemployment as the main cause of problems in social housing. Unemployment is seen to be leading to poverty, idleness and alienation. However, the majority of housing managers and officers do not view societal institutions as being responsible for creating and maintaining these social problems. Rather, they view social problems as the result of a loss of traditional institutions and values. For instance, stewart, housing officer, in the Welsh local authority said

> people say it is the residualisation, it is people on low income but that is not true, it is a reduction in the morals in society, it is not old people who cause problems, it is the young, there is been a change in values ...

These moral values were linked to the heterosexual two-parent family, paid-employment in the labour market, and the education system. These institutions were supposed to instill a respect for authority, a sense of hierarchy, and generally a respect for the prevailing social order. Tony, area-housing manager in the local authority in the Northwest commented

> I think a lot of it does come down to the fact that they are unemployed. I mean a lot of these kids, probably, in the old days they had probably gone into things like apprenticeship, you know and they would have gone to work with a, an apprentice, you know, a sort of an electrician or a plumber ... be with them for five years and it was, in some times it was quite sort of uh strict the way they were treated. You know, like in school now they probably can get away with murder ... As an apprentice ... they developed a respect, if you like and I mean, you know ... but I mean these kids now have got nothing to look forward to, I mean there is just no jobs in the city ... I mean if you have got a high proportion of people whom have got (a) no money to sort of spend and (b) they are in the household side, there is likely to be more friction than if they are at work sort of eight to nine hours, they come home, they are tired and all they want to do is go to bed. Nowadays what they are doing is they have got nothing to do.

Three main points emerge here. First, the dominant ideology of work as expressed by Tony and the majority of people interviewed is that people (or more precisely men) need to be engaged in some kind of paid employment in order to have fulfilling lives otherwise they get bored and turn to crime. Second, there is the idea that capitalist relations of production maintained social control through the subordination to authority and a taste for work which prevented people from creating social chaos. Third, this authority and these work values are essentially male. When he uses the word "kids" he is talking about male kids who used to work as apprentices. He also implies that when men were employed and were therefore outside the home during the day they were too tired to create chaos either in the street or at home. As the following quotation also expresses patriarchal values and institutions are seen to have brought social order and stability through hierarchy and discipline. Martin, the director of housing in the local authority in the North West of England said

> And at least going into the army or the navy or whatever it was, there was a discipline, a regime that uhm forced people for a two-year period to live in a particular way and to conform to certain rules and that was a good discipline for society. And now if you leave school certainly misfits uh [sigh] the proportion of people who have gone to further education is way below the national average.

There is also the recurrent idea expressed by mostly male staff at any level in the organisations but also by some female staff that "kids" turn to crime and drugs on housing estates because they are from families headed by single mothers. This is seen to be leading to social problems because single mothers are supposed to be vulnerable and unable to control their (male) children without the authority figure of the father. For instance, Clive, Area Manager in the local authority in the northwest said,

> ... a lot of families are single families in [the area] and uhm, I do not know whether there is a lack of a male influence in a number of families that allows the children to just be out of control, as young as five and six some of them.

Families with single mothers are seen to be disrupting the natural order as legitimated through idealisation of the traditional family: the employed husband with his wife and children under his authority. Thus, single mothers and their families are seen as unnatural. This was conveyed by George, caretaker for the housing association in the south west of England,

> When I first came here, a lot of them were quite normal, nice people, no problems but lately they seem to be oh, pregnant people or single pregnant people or drug-addicted people or alcohol-addicted people or mental-health problems or something along those lines.

As it is highlighted in the above quotations, and as it has been argued (Mcintosh, 1996; Roseneil and Mann, 1996), this widespread discourse about the underclass is very much gendered and places particular emphasis on single mothers as a social problem. As Smart (1996) points out, the lone mother is represented as a burden on the state, an inadequate mother to her children and as damaging the moral order of society. Mcintosh (1996) argues that the current anxiety about lone motherhood reveals dominant ideologies of motherhood and the family which idealise the nuclear heterosexual married family as symbol of social harmony and national well being with the man as the natural breadwinner and the woman as the natural mother. Representations of lone motherhood and the ideal of the traditional family are both myths, which nevertheless have serious repercussions on single mothers, children and gender relations in general.

Therefore, what is viewed as the natural social order is a patriarchal and capitalist order centred around hierarchical structures which serve to ensure that the disadvantaged sections of the population conform to this order through a conformity to not only institutions but also the ideologies that shape these institutions.

5.2. People living outside the institutional order

Institutions are indeed viewed as no longer being successful in maintaining the dominant social order. It is conveyed that the tenants who cause problems on housing estates are people who have never been socialised into the institutions, which were supposed to integrate them into mainstream society. In this sense the housing estate becomes a different society where social deprivation and chaos are predominant. It is a society described as one where "kids roam wild" not abiding by any rules and respecting anything or anybody. Most housing managers and officers in every organisation talk about a different "culture", a culture of dependency on the state, which is handed down from generation to generation centred around a life-style based on idleness, doing illegal activities, and abusing the system. This is another aspect of the dominant discourse of the underclass (Roseneil and Mann, 1996). For instance, Sarah, housing officer for the local authority in the south east of England says

> You should help people that can not help themselves but there are a lot of people's attitude which is 'I am not going to do anything for myself because it is going to be given to me on a plate'. And I don not think you should encourage that dependency culture.

Many members of staff interviewed also convey, and it is clearly expressed by Sarah above, that many social tenants do not really want to work and prefer to be living off the state, and that if they tried hard enough or were not deficient in some ways they could make it in society. Sophie, Housing Officer for the Housing Association in the north west of England argues,

> ... it is a problem with employment, I think there is problems with education, I think there is just a great lack of respect in children growing up compared to when I was growing up ... you no longer respect the properties, they are not going to respect the fact that the world does not owe them a living, they need to go out and do it for themselves ... I do not think people look into themselves and find themselves and go out and get yourself a job, it is as if a job should be put on your lap and I do not think it should be.

Consequently, it is not so much the institutions which are blamed for creating social problems and poverty but the individuals themselves for the breakdown of traditional values and the state of deprivation they find themselves in.

5.3. Housing officers and managers: parents and children

Housing officers are expected by management, the government, and some of the tenants themselves to take on the role of various welfare and policing agencies. Ron, senior housing officer for the Welsh local authority, says

> We are a policeman, a social worker, a welfare officer. We are expected to be everything...That should not be the case should it?...We should be there as a housing officer...I would have thought a housing officer's duty is to rehouse people, first and foremost ... then you may have neighbour disputes, but they have been promised so much over the last couple of years that the first thing they tend to do now, irrespective of any incident, they phone the housing office.

Other staff say that the housing officer is also expected to be a school teacher, a counsellor, and a priest. The housing officer is thus expected to be an agent of social control, not only expected to take on the role of traditional institutions but also the role of other welfare agencies. Most housing officers and managers think that because a lot of the social tenants are part of this dependency culture discussed earlier, they expect too much from their landlords. As Sophie said earlier, a common view expressed by front-line staff is that they should not be doing too much for these tenants because this only helps to reinforce their dependency on the state. A few housing officers also express some resentment at doing so much for people who according to them "refuse to help themselves". Several housing officers also think that policing tenants and taking on the role of social workers and educators should not be part of their job.

At the same, time another discourse which exist side by side and is sometimes held by the same staff is that even though this should not be part of their role, social tenants need to have agents of social control to look after them but also educate them to societal rules and norms that they have never been adequately socialised into and punish them if they do not follow these.

Jack, the director of tenants services in the local authority in Hertfordshire, defines housing management in those terms,

> ... it is about helping people to manage their homes. Not everybody wants to be in control of everything, that they do need expertise. Little things that can be done. Housing management can be about delivering those services to people, giving people feedback on where they fit in, in the standards that society sets for them, if you like, in terms of the home environment but also, ensuring that the conditions, the basic levels are met, the basic standards are met in terms of quality of life, in terms of cleanliness ...

As Jack expresses, the tenants who have not been adequately socialised to the institutional order and moral values need to be told how to run their homes. Clearly, for housing staff there is a functional aspect to adhering to certain standards of cleanliness as a "tidy" property can mean quicker turnover and less financial cost for the housing organisation. However, as Jack conveys, the concern for cleanliness is not simply a practical one, it is about assessing whether people fit into society according to socially acceptable norms of respectability. As it will now be explored, this assessment is done by housing staff through the ways in which tenants keep their houses and gardens.

6. Good versus bad tenants: culture versus nature

Gardens and houses which are not viewed by staff as conforming to dominant standards of cleanliness symbolise the disorder and chaos that the underclass is seen to bring to the housing estate and society as a whole. Linked to that is the idea held by many members of staff across the different organisations that if they could impose culturally acceptable standards of cleanliness on both private and public spaces, social problems would, if not disappear, at least be reduced. At the same time, there seems to be the idea that what is important is at least an appearance of normalcy and respectability.

6.1. Respectable citizens versus the underclass

According to dominant housing management discourse reproduced by staff at all levels there are two opposed categories of social tenants: the good and the bad. The good or nice tenants are generally defined as respectable citizens who are either in employment or at least want to be, pay their rent or at least try to pay it, look after their houses and gardens, are law-abiding citizens, and do not cause disturbance to their neighbours. These good tenants might also be poor and have difficulties in achieving success but the crucial difference is that they want to succeed in society and thus respect its rules and institutions whereas the bad tenants live on the margins of society and refuse to follow its rules. This is clearly expressed by Linda, manager in the Housing Association in the northwest

> ... people will have problems from time to time and that does not make them a bad tenant. I guess, I would say that it is somebody, who basically at least wants to look after their house, wants to pay their rent or pay their way, who [pause] most of the time is a good neighbour, does not cause

problems to their neighbours ... I would place it on people who are trying and who feel [pause] part of society, compared to those who do not or do not appear not to anyway.

The good tenants are the respectable citizens who aspire to conformity to dominant social values and the bad tenants are those who threaten the prevailing social order by disrupting these values. Often the respectable citizens – the nice tenants – are seen to be in transition towards something else. As conveyed by Linda, they might have difficulties in achieving social and economic status at that stage in their lives but they are aspiring to home-ownership, full-time paid employment, a family composed of husband, wife and children, a good education for their children, and work hard at getting there. Conversely, those belonging to the underclass are seen as being contented with exploiting society and its institutions through crime and long-term dependency on the state without ever giving anything back to society. Melanie, a senior clerical officer in the local authority in south Wales also talks about these tenants as not behaving as people should behave in society

I have only been to a few properties with the housing officers, I mean, they are just tips, they just do not look after/you know because it is not their home and I think they do not, then they go 'why should I bother', that is the kind of attitude of theirs like 'why should I bother, it is not mine', you know, I suppose if they had to pay like/not slagging anyone down that is on housing benefit, but, you know, if they get, if they cannot pay, the rent is getting paid and they have got help ... You know it is a different class (my emphasis). They are different, you know, if [pause] I am not being snobby or anything, I just like nice things and look after things, whereas, you know, they do not. And in a way, you know, the way they are unemployed and [pause] but you know people, you know, tidy people are like, you are not in a Council house now or something? [laughing, pause] I do not know how people can live like that, you know ...

Melanie expresses very clearly the idea that this category of social tenants are a ''class'' on their own, different from the norm: a respectable person should own a house, be employed and look after their house. As it is emphasised here, a feature which distinguishes the respectable or nice tenants from the others is whether they look after their rented property and the spaces surrounding it as if they were their own. Ron, senior-housing officer for the south Wales local authority says

R: A good tenant is someone who takes pride in their house, looks after the garden and who treats the council house as their own, not as somewhere to live.

I: What is the difference?

R: Well, somewhere to live does not have the same value on a place. You will find older people that a house was the main thing in their life was to have a house. A lot of people just do not care, some of the houses are unbelievable, there is no pride in, they just have somewhere to sit and sleep not somewhere to live. Where as a good tenant/they know it is not their own but they class it as their own and look after in that way because they are proud of it, they have pride in their house.

The idea that people should take ''pride in'' and ''care about'' their house and garden emerges throughout the interviews and the comments made by housing officers after visits to tenants. What Ron is expressing is that a good tenant should be somebody who seeks to belong to an area, to try to find stability and permanence. This sense of pride is also tied into having something, which belongs to people and is therefore a symbol of social status and identity. This discourse is also part of a discourse, which normalises home ownership. Indeed, as several studies have shown (Kemeny, 1981; Forrest, 1983; Gurney, 1999), and it is implied in several of the quotations above, home ownership in the UK has become the norm, something that every decent citizen should aspire to. As Gurney (1999) has argued the normalising discourse of home ownership associates home owners with a set of values: pride, self-esteem, responsibility and citizenship. Therefore, home owners are inherently expected to be good citizens, good parents and good caretakers. This discourse excludes people who do not own their homes from the category of respectable citizens and view renting as only a temporary state of affairs (Gurney, 1999).

6.2. Culture taming unruly nature

An untidy garden and a dirty house symbolize the unruly nature of people's behaviour and the chaos that they create in society. In other words, the idea expressed by many housing managers and officers is that if a person cannot keep their house and garden under control it is because they are themselves out of control. But there is also the idea that ''nature'', both human nature and the wilderness, is threatening and leads to chaos if it is not tamed and civilised according to certain cultural norms. To return to a point made earlier, terms such as people ''out of control'', children ''running wild'' and ''roaming the streets'' emerge in several of the interviews. As people have not been properly socialised or civilised they are represented as being ''wild'' more like

animals than people. As Sibley (1995) argues, nature has long been associated with the "other". He states

> To dehumanize through claiming animal attributes for others is one way of legitimating exploitation and exclusion from civilized society, so it is unsurprising that it is primarily peripheral minorities, indigenous and colonized peoples who have been described in these terms (Sibley, 1995, 27).

In the representation of certain groups of people as animals, they are not only seen as distinct from humans but also become associated with dirt and the abject (Sibley, 1995). Thus, here the uncut grass in the gardens and the dirt accumulating in unclean houses symbolises this natural state. It represents untamed nature, which is a threat to the social order. More specifically, unclean houses symbolise the inner chaos of people's lives through their lack of interest in having a home and caring about it. Badly kept gardens symbolise the breakdown of the social order on housing estates. Several housing managers and officers see it as part of their role to ensure that gardens are kept to certain standards. For instance, Martha, area manager in the local authority in Swansea says

> ... housing management is managing the houses, allocations, collecting rents, looking after the void properties, being a visible presence on the estate, making sure gardens and everything are tidy, that housing land is tidy ...

Housing managers and officers imposing standards of cleanliness onto the spaces that social tenants occupy and rewarding or punishing tenants accordingly is far from new. Octavia Hill managers in the first half of the 20th century used an approach which sought to teach tenants good housekeeping and enforce strict moral codes (Brion, 1995; Clapham, 1997; Robinson, 1998). According to management, the ways in which public housing is now allocated and managed is not officially linked to whether or not tenants conform to certain standards of cleanliness. In fact, several housing managers said that they had tried to put in place a system by which it was more difficult for housing officers to discriminate against tenants on any ground, implying for instance that the tendency to judge tenants according to standards of cleanliness was only a problem among front-line staff. However, it is not only individual housing managers and officers who take it upon themselves to control tenants through the imposition of standards upon their gardens. Indeed, this imposition is also inscribed into housing manuals and other policy documents. For instance, throughout the housing management standards manual produced by the Chartered Institute of Housing in 1995, there is the expectation for staff to keep tenants under control by ensuring that visible physical spaces are kept in order. In the chapter on estate management it tells landlords

> Make it a condition of tenancy that tenants keep their gardens tidy and free from rubbish. Identify tenants who neglect their garden, investigate the reasons for this, and enforce tenancy conditions or arrange practical advice and assistance where appropriate, such as for tenants who are infirm or disabled. This could include providing gardening services or referring customers to gardening services run by other agencies.

In fact, as this quotation conveys, gardens are central in the education, punishment or rewarding of tenants. The landlord is supposed to "investigate" why tenants do not look after their gardens and either educate them to the culturally acceptable standards or punish them through the enforcement of tenancy conditions or referral to other agencies of social control. Gardens can also be a way of rewarding well-behaved tenants. Indeed, in some organisations, it has become common practice to organise garden competitions for their tenants to enter, giving a prize to the tenant with the best garden. Joan, policy officer in the council in North West of England says about garden competitions, "it is encouraging them to take pride in their garden".

It will now be shown how standards of cleanliness as applied to both houses and gardens play a central role in the ways in which individual members of staff interact and deal with tenants on a daily basis.

7. Helping the nice tenants: strategies of control and exclusion

Therefore, the imposition of socially and culturally defined standards of cleanliness onto the spaces that tenants occupy are reproduced through organisational structures and practices, and dominant housing management ideologies. The imposition of these values is also reproduced by individual housing officers and managers through the ways in which they relate to tenants and the coping strategies that they develop in order to deal with the conflicting pressures of having to take on many different occupational roles while operating within tight resource constraints.

Even though front-line staff have to operate within pre-determined policies and procedures they can still influence the decisions that managers make, for instance, regarding the allocation of properties. Housing officers can also decide to adopt different courses of action for different people within the confines of policies and procedures. The ways in which they perceive and

interact with individual tenants shape the ways in which they deal with these cases. As discussed in a previous paper (Saugeres, 2000), housing officers will indeed find ways to help those they perceive to be nice tenants while they will not "go out of their way" to help others. However, for housing officers but also managers what makes a "nice" tenant is often read into the ways in which tenants' houses and gardens are kept. George, housing officer for the council in south Wales says

> A good tenant is somebody who pays their rent...is prepared to adhere to the terms of their tenancy, with regards to looking after their gardens, ... You know, if they are a tidy tenant, or a nice tenant, you will find that the housing officer will, in some cases, even go out their way to help them, because they are nice tenants.

Indeed, having accompanied several housing officers visiting tenants or potential applicants, one of the first comments that housing officers, both men and women, often made on leaving the houses was whether they thought the place was kept nice or was clean and tidy or not. In these comments, being a nice tenant and having a nice house and/or a nice garden were often equated. For example, I accompanied Norman, Housing Officer for the housing association in south Wales, during a visit to a woman he knew who had recently started to be in rent arrears. As soon as we went into her house, he said to her "your house is always tidy". During the visit, after she asked him a couple of times, he called housing benefits on her behalf even though that is something he would not have done usually. As he was on the phone waiting to speak to somebody, he said again, "I do not know how you manage to keep your house so clean". After we left, he commented to me, "she is a nice lady, her house is immaculate, it is so tidy and she is got six kids in there".

As mentioned above, it is both housing officers and those in more managerial positions who reproduce the same ideologies by which a tenant is defined as respectable or not in relation to ideals of cleanliness. For instance, Victor, housing manager for the Housing Association in south Wales talks about how he made the decision to move a tenant in rent arrears to a bigger house. Victor relates

> There was a circumstance recently where a tenant uh presently in a three-bedroom house with three children, a tenant and his wife, uhm the youngest daughter had recently been diagnosed as being autistic, so there was a need then for a four-bedroom house. Uhm, the chap was about a 150 pound in arrears, ... *his house was spotless*, *best garden on the whole estate, he has been a good tenant over the years* ... there is a clear case that there are arrears but it is reasonable to allow sometimes to go to a larger property ...

Victor first emphasises that this family had to move to a bigger house because of medical reasons which would have been defined as a need according to the policy of the organisation. However, according to organisational rules and procedures tenants who owe rent should not be rehoused until they have cleared the entirety of their debt with their landlord. But because Victor considered him to be a good tenant, not only because he had been able to pay the rent in the past but because he had a "spotless house" and "the best garden", he made the decision to ignore this aspect of policy. Like the tenants who enter garden competitions and through these are rewarded for being good tenants and good citizens, this tenant was given a prize – a bigger house – for having behaved according to the rules of normalcy and respectability. It is interesting to note that Victor at another time in the interview recognises that these are "middle-class" values that he, and other housing managers and officers want to impose on tenants

> on one level I, I would like all our tenants to be earning good money with stable families uhm, just one car, no horses in the back garden, I do not know [laugh] uhm and sort of a good level of education, but I mean that is just a middle class sort of dream. I know that in social housing they are never gonna get that.

It is, therefore, at all levels of the housing organisation that the standards of cleanliness and tidiness of gardens and houses are used to reproduce an unequal socio-spatial order which keeps the most disadvantaged people on the margins of society. The extent to which conformity to certain standards of cleanliness is enforced varies from organisation to organisation and between local authorities and housing associations. As the research revealed, some housing officers and managers are also more inclined to be influenced by these ideologies than others and more inclined to impose these values onto tenants than others. As mentioned earlier, housing managers and officers do not simply reproduce dominant ideologies, they are able to negotiate and renegotiate these in very different ways according to their different subjectivities. A few housing officers said that telling tenants how to keep their houses and gardens tidy should not be part of their roles, nor should they be judging tenants according to these criteria. These same housing officers, however, might reproduce dominant ideologies of cleanliness and respectability when dealing with tenants. For example, Derrick, residential housing officer for the Local Authority in south Wales, said,

> There is no ideal tenant. If they paid their rent on time and everything worked out ideally, what would we be doing?...that keeps us in a job ... I got old boy down the flat, somebody needs – his place is – I mean they would not rewire it because it was so dirty, you know...I would not criticise him for the world. I would not go in there and moan and groan at him, and tell him to do it. He is not a – he will – he will never change, that is – that is him, [LS: um, right] and until he passes on, or leaves, then we have to tidy the place up...He is not – he is not an ideal tenant in many ways, but in other ways he is a character, you know, and – and we need those kind of people ... he is just different.

Dave conveys that they have to accept that some of the tenants are never going to conform to certain standards of cleanliness and this does not mean that they are bad people; it is a matter of accepting "difference". According to Dave, if they did not have unruly and untidy tenants, their jobs would be less interesting. However, during a visit to the housing patch he was responsible for, Dave commented on a house with flower pots on the window sill saying "you see some people are tidy, they make an effort, they have pride". On that day, he went to see a woman who wanted to move to another house in the area. It was clear that from the way in which he interacted with her that he thought she was a nice tenant. Afterwards, he was talking about the fact that even though officially she was only entitled to only two reasonable offers for rehousing, if she turned down both offers, he would probably talk to his line manager to allow this tenant to consider a third offer. As I asked, why he would be making an exception, he explained that it was possible to do this because she was moving within a low demand area but also added, "and you could see her house was very nice".

This example shows that housing staff do not simply reproduce dominant ideologies of cleanliness in the ways in which they perceive, and interact with, tenants. Different housing officers can relate to certain tenants better than others for a variety of reasons without cleanliness and tidiness necessarily entering into the equation. However, the state of houses and gardens appear to have a powerful symbolic value on housing staff which influences the ways in which they think about particular tenants and make decisions. There seems to exist among staff in each organisation a consensus, both formal and informal, conscious and unconscious which seeks to exclude social tenants already excluded from society through this grading of the physical spaces they occupy according to acceptable standards of cleanliness.

This final example shows the ways in which these ideologies are both reproduced by organisational practices and individual housing officers. Annie, housing officer for the housing association in south Wales, wanted to show me one of her "nicest" estates. As she was driving and observing how "nice" it was, she related that they had been operating a sensitive-to-let policy in that area by which they tried to allocate houses to "nice tenants". She said that this policy was not actually official but they were trying "to be discerning". As she was driving, she commented, "look at the gardens, it is quite nice is not it?" and pointed to one front-garden which had not had its grass cut recently, and said, "I have been after him for a while now to do something about his grass". In contrast, she was saying about the others, "look at these lawns, they are tidy are not they?" and pointed to one which was a small garden with patterns and flowers and said, "look at that one, it is really lovely, all the work he is done". Soon after that, she waved at somebody in a car and said, "oh it is him with the nice front house, if all tenants were like that that had be great".

Annie was on her way to visit a woman who had filed a formal complaint about her next door neighbour. Disputes between neighbours in social housing have to be investigated by housing officers. Most housing officers think that this should not be part of their role because they feel that these conflicts should be dealt either by the people themselves or other public agencies and that there is little they can actually do to solve the situation as they are not actually trained to deal with these situations. As a result, housing officers will often assess the situation and the people involved by resorting to dominant ideas of cleanliness and tidiness.

Before we went to see the woman who had made the complaint, Annie was surprised that it was that woman who had done so, as she thought that the neighbour she was complaining about was a nice tenant because she had never met her or heard about her. She also said that this woman's lawn "looked tidier" than the one next door. After we had been to see both tenants and they had accused each other of similar things and each denied the other's accusations, Annie was confused and said "oh, god I do not know what I am going to do". She then told me that she tended to believe more the neighbour who had been complained against-whose lawn she had already thought of as being tidier before seeing any of the tenants – and said, "I am bias because they are tidy, the house was cleaner and it is true that the first house is an open house, there are often motorbikes and youth in front of the house".

8. Conclusion

This paper has looked at how staff managing and delivering public housing reproduce, negotiate and legitimate unequal institutional power structures. As it

has been shown, they do so by reproducing dominant ideologies which naturalise social inequalities and the institutions through which these social inequalities are maintained and legitimated. These dominant ideologies, as we have seen, are that patriarchal and capitalist institutions such as the heterosexual family, the labour market and the education system have broken down and are thus no longer able to instil in children moral values by which people would conform to the prevailing social order. The picture drawn by discourse of staff is that as a result of not having been socialised to values such as respect for property and authority, aspirations to have a job, an education, and to own their own homes, these tenants are without control turning to a life of crime and idleness. In this view, therefore, it is the people themselves who are blamed for their own poverty and deprivation rather than the institutions of society.

Housing staff are expected to, and do themselves, take on the role of agents of social control who should enforce rules and regulations set by society for people who have not been properly socialised. As it has been shown, housing staff view tenants according to dominant values by which houses and gardens should be clean and tidy. It is as if houses and gardens, which do not correspond to socially and culturally acceptable norms symbolised social decay and refusal to conform to the prevailing social order. Housing staffs are supposed to bring order to these spaces, which symbolise the social disorder and chaos of out of control wild people who live in housing estates. To return to the idea of institutional geographies, this paper has shown how the different housing organisations and their staff seek to utilise, through their discourses and practices, the physical spaces of the areas that they own in ways which reproduce dominant institutional values.

This paper has focused on dominant discourses as reproduced by organisational structures, housing policy, and especially front-line and management staff across different housing organisations. This does not mean that there are no alternative discourses within a given organisation and that every member of staff seeks to impose standards of cleanliness onto tenants or thinks that, social tenants should be controlled. However, as it has been shown, discourses about the underclass, work, the family, and moral values which are consistent with discourses widely promoted by politicians and the media since the 1980s, particularly in the UK and the US, emerge consistently throughout the data generated in this research. Similarly, even though not all housing officers' and managers' decisions about what course of action to take with individual tenants are influenced by the ways in which these tenants keep their houses and garden, it would seem that these values are prevalent and very powerful.

These ideologies are not only reproduced by front-line staff, they are reproduced by the tenants themselves. Many housing officers and managers mentioned that the respectable tenants, those with clean houses and nice gardens, were also asking housing staff to impose standards of cleanliness onto the unruly tenants. This also reinforces the idea expressed by this dominant discourse that the unruly tenants are different from everyone else but as they cannot be physically excluded from public rented housing they need close supervision and control. However, some housing associations, as Annie mentioned, are operating sensitive-to let policies by which only people defined as nice tenants are given housing in a particular area. But the exclusion of people defined as non-respectable citizens by housing organisations is not simply done through their physical exclusion from certain areas and types of housing. As it has been shown, most common practices are for housing staff to exclude tenants by imposing certain standards of cleanliness onto their houses and gardens, and using these values in order to punish certain tenants while rewarding others.

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